

Pursuing the Mythology of Timothy Treadwell

by

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The news commentator's words drifted in from the other room. "Killed by grizzly bears," and "Alaska" penetrated my brain and instantly pulled me from my book. Two bear enthusiasts had been attacked and killed by the same animals they were studying and striving to protect.

My first thought was, "I hope it's no one I know." I was away from my Alaskan home and visiting in the lower 48 when the story broke, but having worked in bear country for the past eight years, I'd come to know several bear biologists and many more bear enthusiasts.

When I learned it was Timothy Treadwell and his partner Amie Huguenard I was especially troubled. Treadwell was not a scientist, but he had spent 13 summers living among bears. He understood bear behavior well enough to have survived for that long. If Treadwell could get killed by a bear, could it happen to anyone—could it happen to me?

As a seasonal ranger who spends a lot of time in bear country, I've learned a lot about bears myself. I get training from the National Park Service, I read journals and science-based bear books, I chat with bear biologists, and indulge countless park visitors eager to share their own bear stories. Out of a sense of curiosity and personal responsibility to better understand bear ecology, I began to look into Treadwell's case.

Although I knew neither Treadwell nor Huguenard personally, I knew Treadwell was well known among bear enthusiasts. I knew that he was famous for coming incredibly close to the world's largest terrestrial carnivores—the massive, salmon-eating, coastal brown bears (*Ursus arctos*), twice the size of the interior bears owing to a rich diet of plentiful salmon I knew he was a staunch advocate and spokesperson for the preservation of bears and their habitat. I knew he had written a book about his experiences, but it was one of the few that I hadn't read.

The syndicated stories of the incident all gave the same basic details: On October 6th 2003, a local bush pilot landed his floatplane in Katmai National Park's Kaflia Bay. Treadwell had arranged for the pickup from his camp two days prior via satellite phone. But in place of his two clients, the pilot found an aggressive bear feeding on what he thought might be human remains. He notified the Park Service through his dispatcher and soon two rangers and a pilot joined him to conduct a search. As they walked toward the campsite, the four were approached by a bear. It emerged from the thick, bushy terrain only 20 feet away from them. They yelled at it, but the bear continued towards them. Fearing for their lives, they shot and killed it.

Minutes later two state troopers arrived. Exploring the campsite, they found two crushed tents, an assortment of gear, and a large “dirt pile,” the bear’s food cache which contained human remains. Both victims had died at the site.

With daylight waning, the officers moved quickly to take photographs and ferry the evidence and the remains down to their planes. When they were nearly finished, a second adult bear approached them. They could not deter this one either. When it approached dangerously close, they shot and killed it too.

By the time I returned to Alaska, everyone seemed to have an opinion on Treadwell. Some felt he was just another eccentric—an outsider who got in over his head. Others defended him as a true bear expert and conservationist caught in the wrong place. There didn’t seem to be too many people on the fence. People either loved him or were nominating him for a Darwin Award. Most Alaskans seemed to lean toward the latter.

Before Treadwell became a self-appointed bear defender, he had nearly lost his life twice. Back in California, he later wrote in his book Among Grizzlies, he had been mired in alcohol abuse and drug addiction. “I medicated myself with lines of cocaine, buckets of booze, and sprinkled in the new thrills of crystal meth and Quaaludes.” A few weeks after looking down the gun barrel of an angry drug dealer, he took a nearly fatal heroin overdose.

While in the hospital, Treadwell would later write, he realized that the “close call with the grim reaper forced me to evaluate my status on earth.” After talking to a friend, he decided to get a new start by escaping to wild Alaska.

Nearly a year later, he spent a few weeks in Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and remote parts of western Alaska. There, he encountered his first few bears. He wrote that he “gazed into the face of a kindred soul, a being that was potentially lethal, but in reality was just as frightened as I was.” And, “To me, animals possessed the innocence and freedom that I could only wish for.” In them, he saw a clear reflection of himself, or what *he hoped to become* if he could stay away from drugs—a being that was innocent, free, powerful, and in control.

Eventually, Treadwell learned of an isolated spot in Katmai National Park thick with brown bears and thin on visitors—exactly the place he was looking for. He dubbed it “The Grizzly Sanctuary” and began to spend his summers there. Treadwell saw the relationship as mutually beneficial. Treadwell offered the bears a human shield against potential poachers and a voice arguing for their preservation. He decided to dedicate his life to them. In return, the bears gave Treadwell an outlet for his addictive or obsessive personality and brought some order to his life—things he couldn’t find in urban America.

In his first days there he would nearly die again, this time not from drugs or guns or even bears, but the daily challenges of living in a wilderness. He didn’t know how to set up a tent, his sleeping bag was too small, he didn’t understand tides or Alaskan weather or

virtually anything that would help him survive. In line with his obsessive personality, he persisted, learned and survived.

Treadwell spent his winters traveling to schools around the western United States teaching elementary school children about bear ecology. His images of Alaskan wildlife and scenery were an easy sell with fourth graders. He took the time in his introduction to explain his near overdose. In this setting, Treadwell's lack of any scientific background may well have been an asset. The students respected his forthright and self-deprecating approach. (*How do you know all this?*) He was likable and the kids identified with him. Dramatic imagery presented by an educator who was charismatic and also somewhat childlike yielded an ideal combination for teaching.

But before he could bring this message to thousands of schoolchildren, Treadwell first had to teach *himself* wilderness survival skills. In his case, the lessons involved learning how to communicate with bears. Through careful and prolonged observation, he attempted to interpret the subtle meanings of bear postures and vocalizations. Walking on all fours, standing with hands half-raised as though they were paws, engaging in or avoiding eye contact, woofing, snorting or growling, and approaching or retreating were just a few of the ways he mimicked bears in his attempts to communicate.

Park ranger Stephens Harper contacted Treadwell numerous times during five field seasons of working at Katmai. He was among those who respected Treadwell's knowledge. "He had an extremely fast learning curve from the first couple of years that he spent on the Katmai Coast. [He started out] knowing absolutely nothing about bears at all and their behavior, to being able to understand their body language and ... their actual vocalizations." By immersing himself in the company of bears, Harper says, Treadwell was able to watch and listen to a bear and respond in a way that seemed to tell it, "I'm no threat to you—leave me be."

Harper's respect wasn't shared by everyone. For many years, the Park Service, commercial tour operators, and researchers alike clashed with Treadwell. Treadwell racked up reprimands for improper food storage, sparked conflicts over how to safely view bears, and triggered disagreements over how to camp safely in bear country.

Many in the scientific community criticized him for ascribing too many human characteristics to bears. While most bear biologists acknowledge that some anthropomorphizing is helpful for teaching others about bears, they also warn of reading too much into what a bear might be thinking or feeling.

Treadwell not only guilty of this, he took it to a completely different level. He wrote, "The beautiful animal edged closer, radiating happiness and contentment" and "Kate relaxed at the sound of my voice. As she stretched toward me her ears perked up, and all signs of stress melted away." These are not isolated examples. This is how he always spoke of bears.

“My life’s work would be to educate people about bears and to help them understand that what’s good for grizzlies is, indeed, also good for people,” he wrote. Regardless of where one stands on Treadwell’s methods, no one can deny that he was dedicated to the protection of bears.

Some of Treadwell’s early video footage demonstrates just how irresponsible he was. The images show Treadwell walking casually near sows with cubs, speaking to them in a relaxed and gentle voice, as though he wasn’t in one of the most dangerous situations possible with North American wildlife. ?) It was this footage that would bring him fame and notoriety. The footage set off alarm bells at Katmai park headquarters. Katmai Superintendent Joe Fowler told me, “Timothy had a good message about bears and people. However, we don’t think the way he behaved in some of his video was in the best interest of bears or was consistent with his message.” They asked him to alter his presentation so as to prevent anyone from copying him. They also asked him to add more cautionary rhetoric. Treadwell complied. During the last five years of his campaign to save bears, he constantly warned others not to follow in his footsteps. He stressed never to feed bears, to store food in bear-proof containers, not to run from bears, and to stay at least 100 yards away.

He abided by all of his own rules except for this last. Blurred by obsession, Treadwell felt he was different because he could relate to bears in ways that were impossible for others.

In some ways, Treadwell’s skewed perception was understandable. As USGS bear biologist Tom Smith points out, the size of a bear’s “personal spaces” depends on where it’s from. In Denali National Park, for example, where bears are few and far between, visitors must remain one quarter mile away. In Katmai, however, which teems with grizzlies, a distance of only 50 yards is permitted. Bears accustomed to interacting with other bears in densely populated areas, Smith says, will tolerate not only bears but also people in relatively close proximity. That’s why bear viewing in Katmai has generally been so safe.

Until Treadwell and Huguenard’s deaths, there had never been a fatal bear mauling there despite the hundreds of daily visitors. Still, all animals do have their limits. “That’s the most important fact that Timothy didn’t get, Smith explains. “Ultimately you push them and you’ll find out that Katmai bears *are* bears. They’re just as aggressive. It just takes a much closer approach to trigger that.”

Beneath all of this lies the contradiction I still struggle to resolve. Treadwell knew that if a bear killed him, a number of tragic repercussions would follow. First, the bear would be hunted down and destroyed. Second, any credibility that he might have established as a scientist and advocate could be lost along with the bear. Third, not only would *he* be dead, but the *voice* he lifted to protect bears would be dead as well.

If Treadwell wanted to keep bears safe, he must have known he would have to keep himself safe. That would have meant taking the prudent precautions that others in places like Katmai take. When Treadwell lost his life on that October night, he lost so much

more: the life of his partner Amie Huguenard; the lives of two of the bears he was studying; and ultimately his scientific credibility.

The story of Timothy Treadwell is a tragic one. He saved himself from drug addiction in California, only to find a substitute addiction in the bears of Alaska. Bears fulfilled his desire for communion and discovery, but he turned a deaf ear to their status as wildlife. Saddest of all, the fact that he never recognized at all was his own hubris.

Treadwell took risks. He didn't carry pepper spray. He didn't use electric fencing. He camped directly on well-worn bear paths. In the end, Treadwell died not because of one rogue bear but because he put himself in dangerous situations too many times. "This was not a case of that one in a million 'bad bear' but a case of luck running out on a person that broke the rules over and over again," says bear biologist Tom Smith. Treadwell's friend Louisa Wilcox acknowledged this and added, "He decided how he was going to live with these animals and he died by those rules."

Treadwell's story will most likely evolve into a colorful legend told around campfires and barstools—not a rallying point for potential developers of sensitive bear habitat. Bear biologist Stephen Stringham, who had been encouraging Treadwell's studies, speculates that he will "get mythologized and ten years from now we'll look back and the stories about Tim will bear very little resemblance to the person that lived."